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## SYMPOSIUM—VOCATION

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### I. VOCATIONAL DIRECTION, OR THE BOY AND HIS JOB

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Secretary for New England, National Child Labor Committee.

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I believe the old debating society problem as to whether work is a blessing or a curse has never been satisfactorily settled. Those of us who are strongly orthodox in spite of the clouds of heterodoxy which so surround us may look back to the time when the human race was able to live without work; when the spontaneous growth of one beautiful garden provided for all the wants of its inhabitants, and we recall that the sentence to toil for bread was imposed on man as a distinct penalty for sin. This seems to make the case reasonably clear for the negative: that work is not a blessing, but a curse; but in these days we are not accustomed to determine social problems entirely by reference to the Scriptures. There is always the fear that the higher critics or the lower critics or some other bold investigators may find some emendation, or that there may have been some omission or alteration to suit the fallible judgment of self-styled infallible judges, so that the meaning of the text we base our argument upon is likely to be challenged; and so, very prudently, we try to back our conclusions by application to the world as we know it and see it, and so doing we avoid scholastic difficulties which may otherwise leave us in confusion. With that idea, therefore, I intend to suggest some slight study of the problem of work as we see it to-day. I am not particularly interested in determining whether work is a blessing or a curse. I am interested in some of the present-day problems of the worker.

It is fashionable to claim a love for work, although a good many find it possible to speak of it in terms which cannot be ranked as extravagant encomiums; but the love of work, if anybody has it, is absolutely unnatural; it is an acquired taste, like the taste for olives or the taste for Wagner's music. That is the history of the individual and the history of the race. The child works to win

approbation or to avoid reproof—not for the pleasure of working. Savage tribes with their few needs come nearest to living in leisure, though even among savages there must always be some workers. As desires and needs become greater, working to supply them becomes more common. Among civilized peoples the demands of the individual and the family are so great that the habit of working has become well-nigh universal. In the early history of civilization most manual labor was performed by slaves. In ancient Greece, which we are so fond of emulating in many ways, the number of slaves was from four to six times as large as the number of free inhabitants. In later times slaves or serfs still continued to do the manual labor, and the upper classes, the free men and women, were able to devote their lives largely to leisure. With the abolition of slavery, and the economic rise of the lower classes, it became more and more necessary for all to work, and we, in this country, have reached the point where we look upon a person who has no regular occupation as either a profligate idler or a dangerous vagrant.

In an ideal state of society no one would have to work unduly; the father of the family would be able to support his wife and children without their having to enter occupations outside of the home; every worker would find his tasks congenial and sufficiently productive to meet all his demands. Under such circumstances we could recognize work as a blessing, for it would undoubtedly serve to prevent the evils which follow in the path of idleness. That we are a long way from the ideal state is evident when we realize that thousands of toilers, even in prosperous America, must spend every waking moment in a frantic endeavor to gain the barest subsistence by their work; that women are so generally going into industrial life that the stability of the home itself seems threatened; that the labor of children is in such demand that our schools provide a complete grammar school training for only one child in three; and that discontent with the job and dissatisfaction with the recompense are driving ten thousand workmen daily into disastrous strikes.

Work may be a blessing; I believe that it sometimes is, but many curses seem to rest on the hapless worker. It is not a marvel in view of all this that our country is infested with a legion of vagrant non-workers, who have found preying on society more pleasing than holding an honorable place in the ranks of producers. We all do always what we want to do most, and the tramp prefers

his idle existence of vagrant uncertainty to a treadmill existence of industrial uncertainty.

### *Unemployment*

Let me sketch briefly some of these present-day labor problems. One of the first in importance is that of unemployment. We have no figures on which to base statistics as to the number of unemployed in the nation, but several states have published from time to time in their statistical reports figures or estimates touching the question. In Massachusetts, for instance, there is annually published a report of the number of unemployed people connected with various labor organizations; New York publishes a similar report, and several other states give some information on this subject. There have been one or two careful investigations made by private workers, and all these help us to form some estimate of the extent of the problem of unemployment. In general, it seems safe to say that nearly twenty per cent. of those who should be producers at any one time are unemployed. It is not always the same twenty per cent., though perhaps one quarter of this number may be permanently at leisure. Even in the most prosperous times, and among skilled workmen, there is a surprising amount of time lost from lack of work, bad weather, sickness, strikes or other reasons. A careful study of the conditions of 152 workingmen's families recently made by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics reveals what is there referred to as perhaps the greatest evil of the American industrial system. These families were probably somewhat above the average; the heads of the families earned on the average \$594 a year, but in 127 out of 152 cases the earnings of the head of the family were not sufficient to pay the family expenses; minor children contributed more than eleven per cent. of the aggregate family income, and wives working outside of the family contributed nearly six per cent. of the total income. That the inability of the head of the family to provide for all necessities was largely due to irregular employment is shown by the fact that the workers lost on an average thirty-five working days in a year or eleven per cent. of the possible working time.

### *Women in Industry*

The presence of women in the industrial world is a comparatively recent factor which must enter largely into any consideration

of labor problems. There are few lines of industry into which women have not entered; indeed, out of 303 occupations or groups of occupations named in the United States census in 1900 there were only four which women had not entered. There are women blacksmiths, women barbers, women sailors and women hostlers, women preachers and women bartenders. The only occupations which were open to men alone in 1900 were the military service of the United States, that of telephone and telegraph linemen, roofers and slaters, and steam-boiler makers. I do not know why women have shunned these last three occupations. I know, and so does many another man whose first training was in the district school, that women know well how to handle a shingle, and why they have not entered into the vocation of roofing seems unaccountable; and it would not seem an impossible transition from the washboiler to the steam boiler, nor from the clothes line to the telegraph line. However, our data is ten years old; no doubt when this year's census figures appear we shall find the military service the only unassailed refuge for man. There are eight occupations in which the number of women exceeds that of men. This excess is natural in such occupations as that of keeping boarders and nursing, but it is wholly unnatural in the profession of teaching, and not entirely essential in the stenographer's career. The feminization of our schools has caused many a serious thought to educators, and the presence of women in business offices, where as stenographers they far outnumber men, has caused serious thought to social and moral leaders. Ten years ago a little more than one-sixth of all the women in the country were reported as wage-earners. In general they work for less money than do men; often they do better work. How generally they become real competitors with them, even to the extent of forcing men into idleness, cannot be told, but true it is that the father at home doing the housework, while the mother earns the living in shop or factory is by no means infrequent; nor do we know how often a business career before marriage has caused disaster thereafter through the inability of the wife to perform the household duties. That such cases are common our divorce court records show.

#### *Child Workers*

The percentage of child breadwinners between the ages of ten and sixteen was, according to the census of 1900, almost the same

as that of women workers; nearly one-sixth of the children of these ages were reported as at work in so-called gainful industry. This picture is darker than that of the employment of women, for there are lines of work which by their very nature are adapted only to women, and there must always be independent and unattached women for whom employment is as necessary as for men, but there are no occupations in which the child is naturally and rightly employed. Our customs, and to some extent, our productive machinery, have made child labor seem almost indispensable, but the child's work can always be done by an adult. Nor is the labor of the child justified as a measure of family support. It more frequently happens that the child in the factory drives the father into the breadline than that its work reduces the father's cares by adding to the family income.

There is something subtle about the problem of child labor. We are prone to see the evils of idleness and have the tendency to believe that any kind of work is good for anybody. We assume too readily that work is of necessity a blessing. All agree that since the child must be trained to a life of industry he should have some industrial education, and there are many who can not see why this education should not be acquired through productive labor at an early age. The most unfortunate thing about such labor is that it is not educative, for the child employed in the factory, the mill, the store or the street is not learning a trade or acquiring a means of future subsistence. Tens of thousands of children are working in our textile mills, North and South, but few of them learn anything of permanent value; they are doing work which requires neither a great degree of skill nor cultivation of thought, and when they have spent the years of childhood in dreary toil, they are doomed to continue in work little if any higher in grade, and at little or no increase in wages. The breaker boys sitting across the chutes through which pour the ceaseless streams of anthracite, are not learning as they watch the flow of coal and cull out the pieces of stone and slate; in exchange for their youthful vigor they are not acquiring any training which will be useful to them in future years; they are only filling in their time and using up their energy in this occupation. Not only will they be no better miners for their years of work on the breaker, but as their health and strength are sapped,

and their education wholly neglected, they will be less efficient workmen and less valuable citizens because of that work. The thousands of messengers and errand boys on our city streets are not on the high road to success; they are not learning business methods nor habits of industry. On the contrary, they are learning to idle away a large part of their time, and not infrequently are being trained in every vice. They are occupying themselves with tasks which, according to our strange custom, are recognized as suitable for boys only, and in a few years they must leave their places for other boys, while they go out without training for useful industry and with habits almost invariably tending downward. It is not purely by chance that eighty per cent. of the boys committed to the reform schools in Massachusetts have been previously employed as messengers or newspaper sellers. The life on the street leads almost directly to the juvenile court and the reform school.

One of the greatest reasons for objecting to employment of children in seasonal industries, like fish-canning on the coast of Maine, is the fact that such employment teaches idleness rather than industry. The worker readily gets the habit of relying upon his earnings during the season for an alternate season of unemployment. If we must work, regular habits of industry must be formed, and this is not done in trades which leave half the year unoccupied.

In the department stores of our large cities thousands of young girls find employment as cash-girls and bundle-girls; it might seem most natural that these girls should grow up to take positions as sales-girls, but that is not the case; when they become too old for children's tasks, they are still unfitted for any special vocation, and the great majority seek low-grade employment in factories or shops, or disappear in the underworld.

The boy on the farm, working by the side of his father, may be acquiring a valuable education; and the girl occupied with household tasks is learning that most important of careers, home-making. The great fault found with commercialized child labor is that the armies of children employed are not only deprived of the opportunity to acquire education in school, but are being taught nothing which can serve to make them better able to support themselves when they reach manhood and womanhood.

All these evils are phases of the so-called labor problem.

Various are the means of amelioration suggested; advanced legislation will stop much child labor, increased wage scales may make it possible for the *pater familias* to support all the family on his own earnings, tariffs may be raised or lowered, and monetary standards may be revised. Doubtless all these may help solve the great problem, but we must not forget that the condition of the individual cannot be greatly bettered unless we better the individual, and aid him to place himself in fittest relations to his environment. One very grave fault in our industrial system is the haphazard way in which people get into it; working women and children and many unemployed men are suffering from lack of adaptation to their occupations.

### *Industrial Unrest*

About a year ago I sent out from my office several hundred letters to people engaged in various occupations, asking them to answer certain questions; among these questions were: What is your present occupation? How did you happen to choose that occupation? Did you have any special qualification or training for it? Are you satisfied with it? If you were to choose again would you choose the same thing? I received a large number of replies, and in looking them over I found that of all the people who replied, representing nearly every profession and line of work, only about five per cent. stated that they were so well satisfied with their present business that if they were to choose again they would choose the same thing. Of course it often happens that the other fellow's job looks better to us than our own, but making all due allowance, I feel that when only a small per cent. of our people claim to be satisfied with the work they are doing, it shows something radically wrong in the way they have chosen their work.

Certainly no act in one's lifetime is more important than the choosing of a career, and none deserves more careful thought. Yet the vast majority of our people drift into this or that vocation without even exercising the right of choice. I have a young friend who graduated from high school three years ago; being ambitious and bright he immediately sought employment and earned his first money as a teacher; soon he realized something of his need for more education and he left home for college, intending to specialize in pedagogical lines; at the college he found that theological students were given free scholarships, so he enrolled for a course



in theology, which he seems to have absorbed very quickly, for after a few months of college he left to take a pastorate in a country town. One of his parishioners, an old storekeeper, took a fancy to the boy and offered him a partnership in his business, which the young minister promptly accepted. Selling groceries soon seemed to have proven distasteful, and I learned a few weeks ago that the young fellow was studying law in an attorney's office. Now, what that young man needs, I suspect, is to learn what his own qualifications are, and in what vocation those qualifications are most likely to be employed to advantage. He may succeed by this process of testing everything in sight, and take his place where he can be most useful and most happy, but it is a slow and dangerous process, and the chances are that he will waste his time and enthusiasm, at last to adopt an unsuitable occupation or to stumble along through life, that unfortunate mongrel—a jack of all trades.

Boys enter their lifework only rarely as the result of conscious choice. "The building of a career is quite as difficult a problem as the building of a house, yet few ever sit down with pencil and paper, with expert information and counsel, to plan a working career and deal with the life-problem scientifically, as they would deal with the problem of building a house, taking the advice of an architect to help them."<sup>1</sup>

### *Choosing an Occupation*

Among the answers to the question, "Why did you choose your present occupation?" which was one of the queries in my questionnaire, were such as, "Because that was what other boys were doing." "Because I happened to get a job at that trade." "Because that was the principal line of work near my home." "Because I had to take the first thing that I could get." "Because I thought the work was easy", this the reply of a motorman. "Because I could make more money at that than anything else." But the greater number could not answer the question for the simple reason that they had not chosen their vocation; they had only happened upon it, and they were without fixed purpose in following it; they might at any time drop it and take up another job or go without as chance should determine.

Boys find themselves in their vocations as the result of custom,

<sup>1</sup> Parsons' "Choosing a Vocation."

heredity, propinquity or accident far oftener than through deliberate and conscious choice. It is surely unreasonable to look for good results under these circumstances; there must be the closest adaptation of a man to the position he fills if the result is to be happy. No one would expect successfully to mow a lawn with a safety razor, yet the razor is much better adapted to that work than are some people for the jobs they hold.

We take some degree of paternal care of children up to the time they leave school, then as they approach what the valedictorian is so fond of calling the "untried and uncharted ocean of life," we leave them absolutely without guidance to sink or swim as best they may. Why do we without a protest allow the near-sighted boy to become a chauffeur, the dull-eared girl to become a stenographer, the chronically careless youth to become a druggist, and the intellectual lightweight to become a preacher? Or why is not some effort made to guide the boy of constructive mind, artistic bent and mechanical skill into something which will afford a wider range for his powers than the clerical position in a candy shop which may happen to be the first opening he finds?

In the wise choice of a vocation two prime essentials stand out as obvious needs for each individual: (1) that he shall have a clear understanding of himself, his aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources and limitations; (2) that he shall have a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, the advantages and disadvantages, the compensation, opportunities for advancement, social standing and peculiar demands of different lines of work.

Every young person needs help on both these points. He does not know his own powers; he knows less of the vocational outlook. The help he needs cannot usually be supplied by those whom we may call his natural advisers—his parents, his teachers or his intimate friends. The parent and the teacher may have a fair knowledge of the boy's qualifications, although probably their ideas are far from clear and exact, but seldom can they aid at all in the second essential, the extensive acquaintance with the vocational field and its possibilities. That being the case the boy needs a special counsellor, some one who can analyze his character and his qualifications, and give him specific advice regarding the possibilities which lie before him. No person may assume to decide for another just what work he shall do or what occupation he should choose, but it

is possible to help him so to approach the problem that he shall come to wise conclusions for himself.

It has been said that our modern industrial development has been such that children rarely follow the business of their parents. This is partly due to the fact that the boy sees more of the inside of his father's work, and is more familiar with its unpleasant features than with those of any other career. It is perhaps more largely due to the industrial changes which in so many cases make the occupation of one generation obsolete for the next. My father was a sea captain, and in his day there were few more desirable positions. His work was agreeable, profitable and highly respected. Had I attempted to follow in his career my chance for success would have been much less than his, since, at the present time the number of our merchant ships has been so tremendously reduced.

Modern industry is exceedingly complex and it is a difficult process for boys and girls from fourteen to eighteen years of age, or older, to find out in what line they are likely to be most successful. In our so-called democratic society most of the children have been educated up to the time they leave the common school absolutely without regard to any individual characteristics which they may possess. We have not yet been able to undertake what President Eliot calls one of the most important functions of the public school, "the discovery and development of the gift or capacity of each individual child". It is for the interest of society to make this discovery at an early age, and then to make the most of each individual's peculiar powers by early and continuous training. Sometimes, apparently small personal gifts become means of conspicuous service or achievement if only they are early discovered, trained and applied. We are still much inclined to think of the average child, and our school programs are usually made with his needs in view. There is no more an average child than there is an ideal child. Our educational systems ought to be adjusted to meet the needs of the individual. "The best field of corn", says President Jordan, of Stanford, "is that in which the individual stalks are the most strong and the most fruitful; the strongest nation is that in which the individual man is the most helpful and most independent."

As all problems of childhood must relate to the school this question of vocational direction may well be considered as a school

problem. Few homes have the equipment, either physical or mental, to give proper advice to their own outgoing children. Our public schools, however, are organized specifically to fit children for the duties of after life, and there would seem to be every reason why the schools should undertake to help the child in an intelligent choice of vocation.

### *Vocational Counsellor*

There needs to be a man who stands like the signalman in the tower by the side of the railroad track watching for the incoming trains and setting the switch to turn each train to a clear track. The engineer on the moving engine may know much about his own train, but he cannot know which tracks are clear and which are blocked. The towerman knows not only the needs of the train, but sees the condition of the road ahead. So the vocational counsellor, with a broad outlook upon industrial conditions, and a personal acquaintance with the needs and qualifications of the individual, though he cannot determine the life-course of the youth, may help him find a clear track upon which his life trip is likely to be happy.

Let me emphasize what I believe to be most important. This task of vocational suggestion is so great, and may be of so much value, that it should be undertaken by a specially qualified person who may be able to devote his whole time and interests to the work. In small communities it may be possible for the superintendent of schools or some teacher to do some of the work which might be expected of a vocational director, but usually those people have enough with their present duties. A vocation bureau, either under private management or as a branch of the public school work, might well be established in every city. Such bureaus are in operation in Boston, New York, Cincinnati and in some other American cities, some of them under the direction of the school department; others conducted by the Young Men's Christian Association; others under wholly private management. In Germany, where educational problems have been so successfully studied and so wisely solved, work similar to this has been carried on for a generation; in Scotland, too, it is being most successfully done. Industrial conditions in America make intelligent vocational counsel much more important than in either Germany or Scotland. Here is

a fruitful field for the public school, and for private social and philanthropic agencies.

It may seem not immediately possible to organize complete vocational bureaus in every city, but surely something can be done for the present help of our young people beyond anything which we have attempted. Even with no change in organization, and certainly with no lowering of literary standards, our public schools can do many helpful things. Often with its intensely literary curriculum and its bookish atmosphere the school turns the boy away from all outlook upon or contact with the industrial life. The introduction of manual training, and of a more complete industrial education, is helping to remove this tendency, and these changes are long steps in the right direction. We may go further without danger of being accused of radicalism. Something may be done to bring more directly to the attention of pupils in the upper grades the possibilities of vocational choice before them; for example, men of experience in various trades and professions may be induced to give short talks about their work to the upper-grade pupils. The pupils may be helped to make a little analytic study of the trades and professions about which they know or are informed, trying to work out the advantages and disadvantages, the demands and qualifications of the different careers.

Industrial concerns may be induced to allow small groups of pupils to visit their plants at convenient times and see for themselves how the different lines of work are performed. It is surprising how few kinds of skilled labor a boy has good opportunity to see. Perhaps one of the reasons every young boy wants to be a motorman is because he sees the motorman at work.

In our schools there should be systematic and complete records of the personal characteristics and vocational bent of every pupil. Such a record, which may be passed on from teacher to teacher as the pupil advances in his course, to be available when he is leaving school to go to work, might be of very great assistance to a conscientious teacher or a professional vocational director.

The vocational bureau should not be considered as an employment bureau, although it may sometimes serve that purpose; fully as often, however, its function is to prevent the applicant from going immediately to work by pointing out to him the possibilities of greater profit to himself and of greater usefulness to society which

may come from entering some more advanced line of work for which he needs further preparation. It should be remembered that a vocation is not simply a job, that it means much more than that which affords one an opportunity to make a living. The great mass of our people succeed in one way and another in making a living, even though they do work for which they are ill fitted, and in which their best enthusiasm and interests are not enlisted. It may sometimes be necessary for a boy to take the first job that comes to hand, even though it be wholly distasteful to him, but in that case he ought to be encouraged in preparing himself for something which will be more in harmony with his abilities and purpose. The idea of thoughtful, personal choice, and of earnest, unchanging purpose should be cultivated in every young person. The boy who has wisely made up his mind regarding the career which he should follow, as he can do after having taken expert counsel and sympathetic guidance, is likely to find an opportunity to enter his chosen vocation and to remain in it successfully; while his companion, who is merely waiting for something to turn up, and is following a purposeless round of uncongenial labor, is pretty certain never to find the chance which he vainly hopes may come to him.

I do not present the suggestion of vocational direction with the idea that it will prove a complete solution of the labor problem. I recognize many difficulties in the way. It is impossible for us to discern particular talent in case of many young people, and it may be impossible for us to find the opportunity for all to develop talents which they may show. He who undertakes the responsible position of adviser for youth must remember that he is working with human beings, and that he cannot shunt them upon this or that track with as little concern as the switchman turns the freight train. The responsibility, even of advising, is great and must not be lightly undertaken; yet I believe that we are right in undertaking it if by means of so advising and counselling the young we may be able to save some lives from wreck, and help many to better and more useful careers.